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THE TEXAS TRIBUNE

Growth Prospects for Uranium Stir Concerns

By [KATE GALBRAITH](#)
Published: April 14, 2012

HOBSON — At the back of a South Texas uranium processing facility, a few dozen black container drums stood outside, waiting to be shipped. Each was filled with about \$50,000 worth of yellowcake, a powdery substance created from raw uranium.



Axel Gerdau for The Texas Tribune

This uranium processing plant in Hobson hopes to increase the 200,000 to 250,000 pounds of yellowcake it produces each year.



THE TEXAS TRIBUNE

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“That’s pretty close to a Lexus in every drum,” said Gregory Kroll, the superintendent of the site, which is run by the Uranium Energy Corporation, based in Corpus Christi. The company mines the uranium in Duval County and brings it here for processing, before sending it on to a plant in Illinois, where it is further refined.

Company officials hope that the Hobson plant will increase its yellowcake production, now at 200,000 to 250,000 pounds per year, far below the plant’s capacity. Uranium has been mined in Texas for decades, but companies see a potential hike in demand for their product. They are ramping up for a new push, despite concerns from environmental groups that past operations have not been sufficiently cleaned up and pose a threat to aquifers that people drink from.

Last year, the Texas Railroad Commission [granted five new permits for uranium exploration in Texas](#), more than in any year since 2007. Two more exploration permits are being processed, one in Bee County and the other in Goliad County and both sought by Uranium Energy.

Uranium companies’ enthusiasm may seem surprising, given the shock waves caused by last year’s nuclear disaster in Japan. Even Texas’ two nuclear plants felt the jolt: both had been planning expansions, but that talk has subsided.

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Axel Gerdau for The Texas Tribune
Yellowcake, made from raw uranium.

But companies like Uranium Energy are anticipating increased long-term demand for nuclear power from places like China and Saudi Arabia. Also, a big source of supply for American power plants is set to end next year, with the expiration of a program in which [uranium from old Russian warheads is diluted and sent to power plants](#) in the United States.

Dale Klein, the associate director of the Energy Institute at the University of Texas at Austin and former chairman of the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, said the Russian warhead program could be renewed. Nonetheless, he said, “I think the demand for uranium will continue to increase.”

Texas, Mr. Klein added, is a “key player, but they’re not a big player” in global uranium production, which is led by Kazakhstan, Canada and Australia.

Only eight uranium mines were operating in the United States as of 2010, according to the Energy Information Administration. These include two in Texas — one in Brooks and one in Duval Counties. Six uranium production facilities operate around the country, including two in Texas, two in Wyoming and one each in Nebraska and Utah.

South Texas has long been a hub for uranium mining. The metal, derived from ancient volcanoes, is found in a soluble form in aquifers. Often it lies near oil and gas deposits, a result of the way both substances have traveled through fissures in the ground. (Indeed, some of the mining and processing facilities lie in the booming Eagle Ford Shale.)

Today all mining in Texas is done through a process called in-situ leaching, in which oxygenated water is sent into the aquifers to dissolve the uranium. The fluid that comes back up runs through resin pellets that clamp onto the uranium. The resin, which is reusable, is transported to facilities like Hobson, which remove the uranium and turn it into yellowcake.

In past decades, open-pit mining was the norm, but that stopped in Texas in 1992, according to Kevin Raabe, an official with Rio Grande Resources. The old open-pit mines are supposed to be “reclaimed,” or filled with materials like clean soil that cover the uranium. Mr. Raabe’s company manages an old open-pit site in Hobson where Chevron began mining uranium in the 1970s. Cows graze over where the pit used to be.


Some residents seem unperturbed by the old mine sites around South Texas.

“We have a reclaimed uranium pit on our property,” said Jane Mutz, a Falls City resident with land near Fashing. “We eat the fish out of the tank,” she added, referring to a large watering hole.

But Richard Lowerre, an Austin lawyer with Lowerre, Frederick, Perales, Allmon & Rockwell, has been fighting uranium companies for decades and said that many former open-pit mining areas remain unsafe for human habitation.

As for the modern in-situ mines, the companies are supposed to restore the quality of the aquifer to its condition before the mining began, [according to the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality](#), which issues mining licenses and regulates the operations, by designation of the Nuclear Regulatory Commission. (The Railroad Commission’s permits



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Mr. Lowerre and other critics say that companies never do a full cleanup of aquifers.

A 2009 [report](#) by the United States Geological Survey found that most Texas uranium well fields contained a higher concentration of uranium after mining was completed than before.

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This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: April 22, 2012

An article last Sunday about uranium mining in Texas misstated the number of uranium mining facilities in the United States. There are six uranium production facilities in the country, not six uranium mines. The article also misstated the location of one of the facilities. It is in Utah, not New Mexico.

A version of this article appeared in print on April 15, 2012, on page A23A of the National edition with the headline: Growth Prospects For Uranium Stir Concerns.

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